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ABSTRACT

In a study of Negro children's listening comprehension, conducted in 1969, the following hypotheses were tested: (1) Beginning first-grade Negro dialect speakers who scored high, average, and low on readiness tests show no significant differences in their ability to answer literal comprehension questions about stories presented orally in standard English and in Negro dialects; and (2) When retelling stories presented to them orally in standard English or Negro dialect, beginning first-grade Negro dialect speaking children who scored high, average, and low on readiness tests, demonstrate no significant difference in the extent to which they include the following: a. Accurate literal statements, b. Accurate interpretative statements, and c. Evaluative statements. The listening comprehension test consisted of four short fables which had animal characters and were considered free from cultural and sex bias. Ten questions were used to check literal comprehension of two of the stories, and all four stories and the questions were translated into Negro dialect. Sixty subjects, 10 boys and 10 girls in each of the three readiness categories, were assigned alternately to the standard English or the Negro dialect treatment group. Based on the results, it is concluded that use of Negro dialect or standard English made no significant difference in ability to answer literal questions; sex and level of readiness did, however. (DB)

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A COMPARISON OF FIRST GRADE NEGRO DIALECT SPEAKERS' COMPREHENSION OF STANDARD ENGLISH AND NEGRO DIALECT

IMOGENE RAMSEY

Though the study discussed here deals with children's listening comprehension, it evolved from questions related to reading problems. For many years, questions relative to the process of reading and factors or conditions that lead to reading problems have intrigued educators. Within recent years, increased attention has been focused upon the child who has reading problems, and with this increased attention has come greater effort to understand how and why such problems develop.

Among children identified as having more than average difficulty in mastering reading are those whose oral language may be described as nonstandard. These are children whose language deviates quite noticeably from the accepted model for English-speaking Americans.

It has been found that children most frequently identified as speakers of nonstandard English come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The group which may be so described that has received the greatest attention to this point is composed of inner city Negroes. High on the list of frequently discussed causes of these children's reading problems has been the mismatch between their oral language and the language used in beginning reading materials.

Suggestions for improving these children's chances for academic success vary. They range from teaching the nonstandard English

speaker to use standard English before trying to teach him to read to preparing material to be used for reading instruction in the child's dialect.

Whatever the suggestions for improving this child's chances for success in reading, they seem to rest partially upon the premise that he cannot understand the standard English used in beginning instructional materials. While there may well be justification for accepting such a premise, there is little evidence that it has been tested to any appreciable extent.

Presupposing that standard English is unfamiliar to the ghetto child who speaks Negro dialect may be questionable since radios and televisions are found in a great majority of American homes. This includes a high percentage of homes in the $1,000-$3,000 annual income bracket.[1] From this it might be assumed that children in these homes are exposed to standard English. The extent to which they understand that which they hear cannot be assumed as readily.

Also to be taken into consideration is the fact that a majority of these children have been involved in Head Start programs. Here, too, they presumably were exposed to standard English.

The purpose of this study which was conducted in the fall of 1969 was to test the following hypotheses:[2]

1. Beginning first-grade Negro dialect speakers who scored high, average, and low on readiness tests show no significant differences in their ability to answer literal comprehension questions about stories presented orally in standard English and in Negro dialect.
2. When retelling stories presented to them orally in standard English or Negro dialect, beginning first-grade Negro dialect speaking children who scored high, average, and low on readiness tests, demonstrate no significant difference in the extent to which they include the following:
   a. Accurate literal statements.
   b. Accurate interpretative statements.
   c. Evaluative statements.

Since the hypotheses to be tested involved beginning first grade children, it was necessary to develop a listening comprehension test. For this purpose, four short fables which had animal characters and were therefore considered free from cultural and sex bias were selected. These stories were judged to be appropriate for the purposes of this

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[1] William Lerner, "Table 480. Household Ownership of Cars and Appliances, by Income: 1960-1968," *Statistical Abstract of the United States.* 90th ed., p. 326. U.S. Govt. Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1969.

[2] Imogene Ramsey, *A Comparison of First Grade Negro Dialect Speakers' Comprehension of Standard English and Negro Dialect.* p. 6. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana U., 1970.

study from the standpoints of length and interest by an authority in children's literature[3] who had worked extensively with inner city Negro children.

Ten questions were designed to check literal comprehension of two of the stories. All four stories and the questions were translated into Negro dialect. A Negro linguist[4] studied and approved the translations.

A young Negro woman who was a fluent speaker of standard English and Negro dialect recorded the stories and questions in both Negro dialect and standard English. These recordings were also studied and approved by the linguist.

A pilot study involving ten dialect speaking Negro children from a predominantly black school in Evansville, Indiana, was conducted. This pilot study led to the elimination of two questions related to each of the two stories used to test the first hypothesis and other minor procedural changes. With these changes made, the study was conducted in the following manner.

All beginning first graders in three all-Negro Title I schools in Gary, Indiana, were categorized as male and female and then as high, average, and low according to their performance on the Metropolitan Readiness Test, Form A. Children whose total score was 64+ were placed in the high readiness category. Those whose score fell in the range of 45-63 were placed in the average category, and those whose scores were between 24-44 were placed in the low readiness category. Sixty subjects were randomly selected so that there were ten boys and ten girls from each of the three readiness categories. These were then assigned alternately to the standard English or the Negro dialect treatment group.

As children in each school were tested, any child chosen as a subject who was no longer enrolled in that school was replaced by random selection of another name from the same category. One child was replaced in the same manner because she spoke standard English.

In the data-collecting phase of the study, subjects were taken individually to a relatively quiet room. General procedures were explained to the subject, who then listened to the four stories either in standard English or in Negro dialect. He answered literal comprehension questions about two of the stories and retold the other two. Subjects' responses to the comprehension questions and their retelling of the stories were taped.

When all data had been collected, each subject's responses were transcribed and the transcriptions were checked to assure accuracy.

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[3] Margaret Sheviak, Associate Professor of Library Science, Indiana University.

[4] Herman Hudson, then Director of Urban and Overseas Education, Indiana University.

All subjects' responses to literal comprehension questions were scored and the transcripts of their retelling of stories were analyzed for accurate literal, interpretive, and evaluative statements. Analysis of variance was used to determine whether treatment, level of readiness, or sex appeared to be significantly related to comprehension. It was found that readiness and sex were statistically significant factors, .05 and .01 respectively, when subjects answered literal comprehension questions; treatment was not. As might be expected, children in the high and average categories scored better on this test. However, boys in both treatment groups in the average category outscored those in the high readiness category. Also contrary to what might be expected, boys as a total group scored higher on this test than did the girls.

In analyzing the number of accurate literal statements made by subjects when they retold the stories, it was found that treatment was a significant factor. Subjects who heard standard English versions of the stories made a greater number of accurate literal statements which reached the .01 level of significance. Though the difference was not significant, boys again outscored the girls. Boys in the average and low readiness groups who received the standard English treatment outscored boys in the high readiness group.

When the accurate interpretive statements were analyzed, sex was found to be the only significant factor. The difference favored boys at the .05 level of significance.

No evaluative statement was made by any subject.

In only one aspect of the entire test did subjects who heard Negro dialect versions of stories outscore those who heard the standard English versions. This was in the number of interpretive statements included in retelling the stories. Though the difference was slight, it nevertheless was there.

For the subjects involved in this study, it was possible to conclude that use of Negro dialect or standard English made no significant difference in ability to answer literal questions about the stories they had heard; sex and level of readiness did. When subjects retold stories, the number of literal statements made was significantly greater for those who heard the stories in standard English, but sex and readiness for instruction were not significantly related to performance of the task. The number of interpretive statements made was significantly greater for boys, but neither treatment nor readiness appeared to be a significant factor.

Findings of this study do not support the idea that special materials written in dialect are needed for beginning reading instruction. Results do seemingly point to certain questions which merit further consideration:

1. In other all-Negro populations such as this, do boys generally outscore girls on tests of comprehension?

2. Do presently available readiness tests adequately differentiate among Negro ghetto children of high, average, and low readiness?

3. In other all-Negro populations such as this, do children show a significant difference in the extent to which they comprehend material presented to them in standard English and in Negro dialect?

4. Is there a tendency for Negro dialect speaking children to include more interpretive statements when they are retelling stories that have been presented to them in Negro dialect than they do when retelling stories presented in standard English?

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